



Making the Work of Parliaments Responsive to the Needs of Women and Men: Caribbean Parliamentary Workshop

Opening reflection by Dr. Rosina Wiltshire

Men are critical allies, partners and beneficiaries of the gender equality agenda. We heard clearly that it is important not to equate the terms gender and sex or to confuse the word gender with women.

Sex refers to a person's biological and physical characteristics that are inherited/determined at birth. Gender refers to the roles, behaviors, activities, attributes and opportunities that a given society at a given time considers appropriate for men and women. Gender also refers to the relations between women and men. Gender identity is the way we intrinsically define ourselves in relation to masculinity and or femininity. Gender equality refers to the equal rights and opportunities of women and men, boys and girls.

Colonialism and slavery compounded the gender equality challenges with significant negative impacts on men and women. They compounded violence against women unleashed in the European witch-hunts of the 15 and 16th centuries, where thousands of active and professional women in Europe were accused of being witches and burnt at the stakes, and women had to retreat to the home for safety. Men who supported them were also killed. Slavery, where women's bodies were treated as factories to produce a cheaper enslaved population, normalized rape and violence against women. Men were also used as studs to produce enslaved persons more cheaply. One Caribbean island was dedicated to using the enslaved men there as studs, because they were tall and well built, to produce stronger and more hardy enslaved persons. Parents flogged their children, particularly the boys to whip them into obedience and protect them from being killed by the slave master. This trauma and violence normalized violence in the household after the end of slavery and beyond independence. When I was growing up domestic abuse was so normalized that no one condemned it. We have made progress in attitudes and policy since I was a child, but we have a long way to go.

In the Caribbean prevalence rates for intimate partner violence are higher than the global prevalence rates. The Caribbean also has some of the highest rates of rape in the world. The reality of our lives is that there is pervasive violence in homes in which people who promise to love, care for and cherish one another are at war. Homes which should be safe spaces are unsafe. Children do not run away from love. They run from violence. Boys look for welcoming family in the men and boys on the block, and girls seek solace in any man who professes to love them. Let us stop blaming our children and let us look at ourselves.

Children live what they learn and we know from evidence that children who witness or experience violence in their households tend towards violence and antisocial behavior. Violence is not merely physical and sexual, it is also emotional. Young boys are told that they should not cry or hug because that is girlish behavior. In a study across the Caribbean of over 1000 school boys and girls, which I led as the CARICOM Gender Advocate, the boys said that if they walked away from a fight they were laughed at by both the boys and girls. They had to show aggression to be respected. With not many role models of kind, loving, self disciplined men close to them, the boys and young men merely continue the culture of violence in their homes and in the case of the most vulnerable in the schools and on the streets.

Societal violence is directly linked to violence against women, gender based violence and violence in the home, and we need to stop it at its source.

We merely deepen the culture and cycle of violence when we incarcerate our vulnerable young men and boys already traumatized by the violence which they witness and experience in their homes, with few to mentor, support and guide them to change in the right direction. Up to recently girls in Barbados running away from the violence in their homes were brought before the courts under a Wandering Law which made them criminals. Thankfully in March that law was struck down.

Years ago children had communities, grandparents or godparents who would show them love and hug and console them. Today communities are much less cohesive. Church was also a place where children often found a community which reinforced positive values and discipline. Today the church is not the force it was in society and we are witnessing a surge in violence across our society with boys and young men the main offenders. I often hear adults speaking of the need to return to flogging children and the biblical reference to the rod of correction as a justification. Shepherds used the rod to guide the sheep, not to beat them. Some even speak of taking us back to the death penalty.

Children live what they learn and our societies and economies are at risk. We must unite and act to end the culture of violence beginning with ourselves.

Women are half of the world and a house divided against itself cannot stand.

We often hear that women are taking over because they are doing better in schools and are the majority of university graduates. The Speaker shared the fact that while women tend to pursue more education and yet are underemployed and underpaid compared to men. We cannot view gender equality as a competition between men and women. It is essential to the well being of all.

Happy healthy women are the foundation of happy, healthy productive homes and societies. Women must be equal members of the decision making bodies. Everyone benefits and societies thrive.

It is essential that we raise well balanced loving young men, who can express healthy emotions and do not feel the need to be aggressive to be considered male. Children are our mirrors. The violence that we are witnessing in our schools and societies is a distorted version of the violence in our homes.

Many Parliaments and Parliamentary debates which should inspire and guide our children often mirror a culture of parties at war, with violent, disrespectful discourse and gender bias.

As we usher in an era of technology and AI informed by our present culture of violence, division and control, we are in greater danger of losing ourselves, our humanity and community. Our children have even less resilience to the negative impact of technology than we as adults. We are in danger of technology becoming another colonizing master rather than a useful tool. The isolation, divisions and violence will become even more normalized. The gender equality agenda will liberate us all and save our homes and our societies. Parliamentarians men and women must lead by example.